

XIII.—THE OCCURRENCE OF THE COMB-DUCK (*SARCIDIORNIS MELANOTA*) IN MYSORE STATE.

As being of possibly some interest for your records, I would like to report that I shot a Comb-Duck (male), on the 30th November 1941, in the neighbourhood of Gundalpet, Mysore State.

The bird was one of four seen on the tank (probably two pairs).

I understand from Major Phythian-Adams that although he believes that he has seen these birds in the Mysore State in former years, he was not aware that one had actually been shot.

A solitary specimen of the Great Indian Bustard was seen the same day, but efforts to bag it proved unsuccessful.

'LANSDOWN',

R. F. STONEY.

OOTACAMUND,

July 11, 1942.

XIV.—THE BIRDS OF A BOMBAY GARDEN.

The war has put an end to the habit of social and duty calls hitherto practised, ardently or with reluctance, by Bombay Europeans and some others. But birds know nothing of war activities, and still less about petrol restrictions, and, with some notable exceptions, they have been if anything more assiduous than ever in putting in an appearance on my premises and attracting my attention to their existence and their charms. I am hoping that I may be allowed to repay their politeness by giving an account of them in this, I presume, friendly *Journal*. As several of them have never been in my garden before, and some have never even been seen in Bombay island before, I consider that their presence, however fleeting, deserves to be recorded.

I ought perhaps to begin by saying that I am well placed for visits from birds. My house, though unfortunately it is not actually mine, overlooks Back Bay. It has the hanging gardens immediately below it, and on one side what used to be the Ladies' Gymkhana, now almost entirely derelict, and on another side the flat Phirozeshah Mehta garden, covering a water reservoir, and beyond that the grounds of the Towers of Silence, which include a large area, well treed and mostly wild. Besides this, my garden, on both sides of the house, contains a good many trees, and there are many more on and across the roads outside. Not far away to the south are the grounds of Government House, and as most of the houses and buildings on Malabar Hill have well kept and well timbered gardens or compounds, the forty or so birds that I have on my calling list are probably fewer than might be expected. A human caller from Delhi treated the number with contempt. In his Delhi garden his bird acquaintances numbered eighty, he told me. Politeness, or slowness of wit, prevented my replying that in such a matter a compact and civilised city might well be expected to be beaten by a straggling up-country town.

Certainly there is nothing very remarkable about my ordinary residents. If there had not been some much more distinguished personages among my recent visitors I should not have ventured on this article. But before I speak of these I will list the humbler, but more constant friends that I really depend on for bird company.

My constant and unfailing companions are house crows, kites, mynahs, purple-rumped sunbirds, magpie robins, Mr. and Mrs. Koel, and a pair of rock-pigeons. Almost equally certain to put in an appearance, preferably when I can watch them at close quarters during the half hour that I am generally able to give to tea in the shadow of the bungalow on a small lawn that overlooks the Bay, are the coppersmiths (often numerous), iora, spotted fantail-flycatcher, white-breasted kingfisher, red-vented bulbuls, house sparrows, rose-ringed parakeets, palm-swifts, and, towards nightfall, Mr. and Mrs. Spotted Owlet. These, with one most important addition, the white-browed bulbul, whose cheery, rattling call rings out round the bungalow all day, make up my regular bird society. If I have counted them correctly they number nineteen.

Had I made this list two years ago I should have added the Indian robin and the Indian oriole. We used to see the latter frequently, and unless my memory deceives me we used to have the former also, but I certainly have not seen them, since, for now just about two years, I have taken to watching systematically.

Over and above these faithful nineteen a further nine birds take an interest either in me or my surroundings sufficient to bring them here pretty constantly, and to establish a considerable degree of familiarity between us. These are the bee-eaters, present, often in numbers, from October to the end of the year, when for some reason or other they forsake me though remaining in the neighbourhood until the monsoon. Besides the bee-eaters there are the red-whiskered bulbul, drongo, grey and white wagtails, Bombay rufous babbler, white-throated babbler, spotted munias and jungle crows. I must confess that this season I have only once or twice been looked up by a grey wagtail and not at all by any white ones. I cannot account for this, for both species used to be our constant tea-time companions. *Per contra*, the spotted munias and white-throated babblers, whose visits, always in little parties, we used to consider a very special favour, have been here again and again throughout this last cold-weather, and I often see a party of the former flying by. Presumably they know when I have anything worth stopping for, just as the white-throated babblers seem to have a genius for discovering when my *mali* has created a suitable bathing puddled at the foot of an oleander which they treat as a convenient, and modesty ensuring bathing box. All attempts on our part to establish a regular bird-bath have failed; it was invariably taken possession of by crows and kites, and caused a noticeable reduction in the visits of our smaller friends.

From this list of our residents and visitors there are at least two notable absentees. Brahminy mynahs undoubtedly inhabit the gardens and roads of the western, sea-face, side of Malabar Hill, but they totally ignore us on the eastern, Back Bay side. Is this some subtle social distinction that I am too simple-minded to grasp? Do they write their names at Government House, I wonder, or is

their caste too high even for that? Can it be that they are Congress birds, and subject in their social relationships to unnatural inhibitions from afar?

Another notable absentee from the list as so far given is the rosy pastor. He brings me to my once-or-twicers, the last five of whom are the real excuse for this article. With a name like his he might have been expected to be frequently seen at a house called Bishop's Lodge. But only once has he paid his duty call, and then with only a single companion. That was at the end of March last year, when at Colaba I had seen many of them, and at Kurla, at sunset, many hundreds. Another bird remiss in its attentions is the purple sunbird. I think I glimpsed him once, but am uncertain, whereas from Salim Ali's book, shortly to be mentioned, they appear to be not infrequent in the island. Other rare visitors have been paradise flycatchers and pied crested cuckoos, on all occasions towards the end of the hot weather, when no doubt they are on the move up the coast. The flycatchers have always been in the chestnut stage of feathering, but the last seen (this year), though still chestnut clad, had developed the long tail-feathers.

And now for my special and most honoured visitors, considered to be such on the authority of information derived from Salim Ali's *Birds of Bombay and Salsette*. If only every separate part of India had authoritative and exhaustive lists like this one, how much easier life would be for all who like myself desire to be able to put names to faces, however occasionally or imperfectly glimpsed. I will put these special five visitors in a *crecendo*, or perhaps it should be a *diminuendo*, of grateful awe.

First, because they are so small, I put the party of white-eyes that visited the above-mentioned oleander last January. Salim Ali gives four references for their appearance on Malabar Hill, but EHA, our other and older authority for Bombay, confesses to have never seen them on the island, though he considered them common in the cold-weather across the harbour.

Next, I had in December a series of late evening visits from a white-bellied drongo. EHA attributes him to Bombay, but Salim Ali does not bring him nearer than Tulsi Lake. He did not sit so still as the ordinary drongo does, but kept pouncing upwards into the air, uttering a sharp cry each time. He is smaller than the other drongo.

January, which brought the white-eyes, brought also an Indian shikra. He came in the middle of the day, but fortunately perched where I could see him from the lunch table, and gave me time to get quite near with a field glass. EHA describes him under the name Sparrow Hawk, and evidently considered him a common Bombay island bird, but SA (if I may call him that) has only two references for him, one in the city and one on Malabar Hill. The island is much more thickly built on than in EHA's time, and this and other birds have become rare; I think my pride in my shikra is justified.

Still more so is my pride in my Peregrine Falcon; yes, the real article, as aristocratic as anything could be, *Falco peregrinus peregrinus*. He was a tea-time visitor and stayed for a quarter of an hour, and then, when the crows became too impertinent, sailed away

with a most beautiful liquid flight, down towards Chaupatti, and then back to settle, presumably, somewhere further along the hill out of my sight. The fleckings on his breast resembled large and numerous drops of gravy. Mr. Prater assures me that these show that he was a young bird. From the skins I was shown the markings on the breast evidently vary much in different specimens. Though not uncommon on the neighbouring mainland coast he is not recorded to have been seen in the island before.

The final visitors on my list are three large cuckoo shrikes, one by itself in January and then two together in March. They are largish birds, and the first was hunting assiduously through a series of trees. In Whistler there is no picture, and the one in *The Handbook of Indian Birds* does not show the fine, pale crosslines on the breast that all three birds displayed. Salim Ali has no references for Bombay island and considers them uncommon in Salsette, but EHA says that he had frequently seen them on Malabar Hill.

Though this exhausts the birds that I have so far seen in my garden the list does not include all that can be seen from it. From November to March, for instance, there are constantly gulls on Back Bay, especially when fishing is in progress. The brahminy kite is constantly about in the monsoon. A pond heron once flew by at close quarters; our puddle is too insignificant and ephemeral for the likes of him. The vultures that belong further down the hill only occasionally soar into sight. There are two kinds, and why they are not more often in the sky I cannot imagine, just as I can form no theory to account for the flittering about of palm-swifts on some evenings but not on others. Two vultures once settled in a brab palm in full sight of our verandah, as though considering its suitability for a nest or roosting place. I should not have welcomed them as neighbours, and I am glad to say they never came again.

Before I end I should like to mention a few more birds seen recently on Bombay island. Kestrels, though they have abandoned the Marine Lines reclamation now that it is built over, are still to be seen at Colaba, where also, pretty frequently I think, the marsh harrier shows himself. A pair of blue rock-thrushes continue to inhabit for the present the southern of the two Worli hills. I say a pair though I have only once seen the hen, and on that occasion the cock, with his usual lack of sociability, was completely ignoring her. At the foot of the hill I thought I had this year a desert wheat-ear, and I still think it was one, as it was larger than the very similar bush-chat that was there next time I called. On the fore-shore at the foot of the same hill, I am sorry to say a particularly noisome piece of fore-shore, owing to the Lovegrove outfall, I had a year ago, at the end of May, and late in the evening, a flock of golden plover. SA speaks of these as frequent in the neighbourhood though never seen by him on the island. EHA, who must have known that they had been shot at Worli and on the flats and race-course of those days, seems doubtful whether they were likely to be seen. Now that the southern hill at Worli is being dug away for an esplanade and development in terraces, how much longer will these three birds be seen?

In search of waterside birds I visited last November the tidal pans and flats that lie between Antop and Trombay hills. There I had my one and only sight of a redshank. SA considers that it is not abundant in these parts, and has no island references for it. He is a beautiful bird on the wing, and as we were able to stalk him we had a good close up view of the curious way in which, when stationary, he ducks his head as though trying to swallow or regurgitate some morsel. The action is usually described as a bobbing of the tail. It is not that, though the tail, what there is of it, necessarily goes up when the head and forepart of him go down.

Just beyond the place where this bird was seen runs the tidal creek that used to connect with the Bandra creek and justify Bombay being called an island. Beyond the creek, in some small Pilu (*Salvadora*) trees, I came upon a party of white-checked bulbuls, crestless, and except for their yellow vents looking more like much overgrown cock-sparrows than anything else. Only a short time before, I had seen them, or rather their crested relations, in similar trees in Cutch, and I was interested to find that Salim Ali considers that in the neighbourhood of Bombay they are either escaped cage-birds, or, as I much prefer to think, migrants from Gujerat. *Salvadora* is a tree for which they have a special *penchant*. It is a waterside tree, often planted by Deccan wells, and very common in its natural habitat the sea-side of Gujerat and the North Konkan and on for some distance to the south. It is natural to suppose that birds would gradually work their way along the line of a favourite food plant. But *Salvadora* is supposed to be the mustard tree which our Lord says grows from the tiniest of all seeds to be big enough for birds to lodge in its branches. Were the birds He meant white-checked bulbuls, and can Bombay therefore claim to have two Bible birds, the other being Worli's Blue Rock-thrush, constantly thought, owing to its solitary habit, to be the bird that in the English translation of the Bible 'sitteth alone upon the housetops'? My authorities are inadequate to answer this question, but it is a highly suitable one with which to end an article from this particular pen.

RICHARD DYKE ACLAND.

BISHOP'S LODGE,
MALABAR HILL, BOMBAY,
June 12, 1942.

Postscript:—

Once again (for it has happened twice before) a bird has taken upon itself to upset what I have written, and has done so almost immediately after the manuscript had left my hands. It is a Brahminy Mynah that has played me the trick this time, whether with companions watching his escapade and egging him on from the background I do not know. He appeared in the garden early on the morning of June 16th, two days after the monsoon had started. He soon made off, and while here gave every indication of being on unfamiliar ground and in an uneasy state of mind or conscience.

R. D. A.